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THE
PRESENT AGE;

OR

Men and Manners.

BY FRANK CLIFFORD.

“NEC TIMEO, NEC SPERNO.”

NEW YORK:
DEWITT & DAVENPORT, PUBLISHERS,
TRIBUNE BUILDINGS.

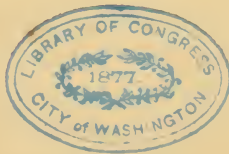
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R. CRAIGHEAD, PRINTER,
112 FULTON STREET.

THE PRESENT AGE ;

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MEN AND MANNERS.

THERE was a time e'er Folly's reign began,
When worth, not "filthy lucre," made a
man,
When Reason ruled, not Fashion held her
sway—
That silly queen whom sillier souls obey.
Fantastic leader of a motley crew,
That follows her from nothing else to do.
Oh! man, thou short-lived insect of a day ;
Corrupted mass of animated clay ;
Is it for this immortal nature joined
The noble form, the keen, discerning mind ?

Is it for this the brave and virtuous soul
Was given to thee? to serve and not control?
Is there no praise to find in virtue's mould?
And has all worth and honor fled to gold?
Yes! flattery's voice will gain a willing ear,
When spurned is that which knows no art
nor fear:

Ah! fatal error, for in Freedom's birth,
Not titles here, but works, should prove our
worth.

To toil and labor is our lot below:
Heaven gave us joy, and also gave us woe,
And gently mixed them both so life should
seem

A stern reality and not a dream.

But all must know that Heaven no flattery
wins,
Nor weekly prayers atone for daily sins;
And yet we see the sober Sunday face,
The downcast look, the slow and measured
pace;

As if one hour throughout a week to pray
Answered for crimes committed every day.
I would mankind could live for other things
And other objects than what money brings ;
Or would that nature never had designed
A manly form, without a manly mind :
For art and fashion seem to me most plain,
Some "ignis fatuus" of the human brain,
By which both sense and reason are forgot,
And people strive to be what they are not.
What crazy poet does this stuff indite ?
Asks some rude reader whom this shoe fits
tight.

But, pray, my friend, my critic, or my foe,
Rhyme comes with reason sometimes, you
must know.

"Loquitur bene stultus interdum ;"

Or, in plain English, "sense from fools may
come :"

And since you say that poets all are crazed,
They should not be too lightly judged or
praised ;

Or when too harshly used or sorely vexed,
They often take their critics for their text,
And show not, Christian-like (I own 'tis
wrong),
That though fools sing, fools still may be the
song.

I like not men who daily try to find
Some trifling blemish in their fellow-kind,
And when once found, the very least of faults,
Make up wry mouths, like children taking
salts ;
Let such but search themselves, and half life
through
They'll learn at length they have enough
to do :
For those that talk of others' deeds alone,
Are not aware of any of their own.
Like wagons rolling o'er a frozen ground—
"The emptiest things reverberate most
sound."

That adage suits as well in prose as rhyme,
And rightly answers any place or time,
When those that have but one idea or so,
And rattle it to let the whole world know
That it is coming—men of mighty mind,
Who in their haste have left their brains
 behind.

O! shame, indeed, that such an age is ours,
Where wisdom fails, and weakness over-
 powers ;
Where pious sceptics never deign to bless,
And silly women scan an author's dress ;
As if the way a coat was cut behind
Foretold the powers of the human mind :
No man's agreeable if he does not wear
Three yards of linen sporting on the air ;
And love-sick girls would at your knot-tie
 smile
Were it not fashioned in the present style :
Then to escape dark scandal's black'ning
 lash,

When nature's false, just wear a false
moustache.

If you are rich, though brainless, you will
pass,

For gold's the lion-skin to hide the ass.—

Should Æsop's fable of the brute speak true,
Then, long-eared lion, it applies to you.

Though at my etching some should take
offence,

And dub me rhymer with but little sense,

Though fierce beasts roar, and little puppies
growl,

“Those born in woods are scared not by an
owl.”

I do not fear, nor spurn, but would reprove,

And neither write for money nor for love,

There is a will that leaves all fear behind,

'Tis resolution, fiat of the mind ;

And I'm resolved, though critics should assail,

For sometimes errors over truths prevail,

To stand the test of time ; and if, at last,

My muse be censured when her reign is past,

I'll know at least she wrote with common
sense,

Nor sang, like others, under false pretence.

Let some, like spiders, from the thread-like
brain,

Weave the fine web, whose labor gives them
pain,

My muse, in different course, more manly
acts,

Rejects all flourishes, and sticks to facts,

And chooses knowledge of the human
heart,

Refusing metaphors that learn of art ;

Then boldly dares to stand in the defence

Of honor, union, and of common sense.

Though some parade their foolish thoughts
in rhyme,

Debasing both the subject and the time,

Proclaim their notions in whole sheets of
print,

And think us stupid not to take the hint

Which they unfold about "our great do-
minion,"

And, self-conceited, venture their opinion ;
As if a "Dido" was of weight with those
Who always think more than the author
knows.

It seems so strange old men with feeble
breath

Should cheat and bargain on the verge of
death,

When, not content with blessing them and
theirs,

They hoard up riches merely for their heirs ;
Or simply those that neither work nor play,
Just fools enough to live by passion's sway,
And floating listless on from wave to wave,
Each lives through life a weak and senseless
slave ;

Whom all that see must soon quit in disgust,
Poor silly heap of gold-besprinkled dust.

"O woful day !" that we're compelled to see
Such prostitution of all modesty ;

When Fitzjames whirls her limbs, bedecked
with lace,
And half-dressed dancers skip in Astor Place.
But what may we expect in such an age,
When foreign fools and humbugs are the rage ;
When honest worth is starving in the street,
And poverty in every shape we meet.
We pass them by, and heaps of treasure
bring,
To some impostor or Italian *thing* ;
Load him with bounty never known before,
And kick an honest beggar from our door :
Tricked and deceived by every knavery,
We still are slaves, though hating slavery ;
And live and move to lose in pleasures vain
What we possess—our fathers' honest gain ;
While any novelty can raise the wind,
From Barnum's mermaid up to Jenny Lind.
Yet all must love her for her kindly heart,
Ready to bless, and always to impart
The rich abundance granted her by heaven,
And, aiding others, hope to be forgiven.

O! that some rich ones of the "upper ten"
Had learned a lesson from good Jenny then,
And not penurious even to life's end,
Leave a few dollars to a poorer friend,
While nearer kinsmen almost wish them dead,
And even envy them their daily bread,
They leave them rich in infamy and ease,
Too weak to vex, too silly to displease—
'Tis sad to see men with such chance of fame
Live without sense and die without a name.

Of all things earthly that I hate to see,
Are prying women in society ;
Well versed in knowledge, but in that alone,
Of every one's affairs except their own.
And such a village life must show to all
Of those well skilled in every household brawl ;
Not e'en a word can pass 'twixt man and
 wife,
But scandal's breath must bring it into life.
Not mere old spinsters, with just brains
 enough

To make false tales, and fill their heads with
snuff,

But young ones, too, who every item know,
From Sally's tom-cat up to Julia's beau,
And vex their precious souls if Catharine's
hat

On Sunday last was more than this or
that ;

If here some ribbon sauntered out of place,
Or some stray ringlet stole adown her face,
" Oh ! young Miss —— does always so ap-
pear ;

She's very awkward—don't you think so,
dear ?”

I know a country Miss—a village belle,
Or so she thought herself—'tis just as well,
Who, paying visits to a favorite friend,
Saw much to blame, and little to commend ;
Noticed each part, and scanned each action
o'er,

Then left them doubled at her neighbor's
door,

She heard and greatly lengthened each report ;

A tell-tale beauty of a certain sort.

I would that men could see with mortal eyes,
Nor render judgments e'er their thoughts
arise ;

Nor self-made critics, critics but in name,
Ready to censure, studious to defame,
That in their stupid ignorance grow bold,
When brains are bribed, and pens are tipped
with gold :

For money's power, and now since "might
makes right;"

'Tis shield and buckler in both peace and
fight ;

And he who wears it little may he fear
From even satire's often venal spear.

And men have we of weak, contracted mind,
Of visions wild and idle schemes combined ;
With restless souls they show in every state
Eternal rancor and unbounded hate :

Pledged to no king save madness, they employ

Each daring plan to vent their savage joy,
While pliant minions stand as slavish mutes,
And yield their voice to baser prostitutes.

With that low cunning that too oft supplies
In silly pates the place of being wise,
They utter spleen, and at each good man
rave,

Too poor for blockhead and too great for
knave ;

Use virtue's rose to hide the thorn of spite,
And fawn in day to murder in the night.

Fanned into sleep by subtartarean wings,

The unsuspecting fear no hidden stings :

But ah ! too late they see their danger then,
Reverse their course, and seek the right
again.

In vain they turn to fly the horrid den

Of human vampyres fed on other men ;

No more 'tis theirs, their race of honor
passed,

Fate's mighty whirlpool swallows up at last.
In dread array their horrid lines appear,
Disunion in the van, destruction in the rear,
Foul shapes from hell,—Fear, Murder, Hate,
and Pain,

And Abolition heads the gloomy train ;
While many warriors of the raving school
Of crazy G-rr-s-n, fanatic fool,
Cry to their betters, “stand aside !” “give
place !”

“Make room for brethren of the colored
race !

Make room for flowers born to blush unseen”
(Not waste their fragrance on the air, I
ween) !

“The cloud of slavery will soon give way :
Thou poor benighted child of Africa,
Then, far removed from all thy dire alarms,
Come, wand'ring child ! come to thy bro-
ther's arms !”

Enough of folly ; to our authors turn,

And good from bad with generous eye discern.

Reprove what's wrong, uphold each manly course,

And show for once right triumph over force ;
For plain and open should be satire's way,
Of tempered wit, by judgment brought in play.

The poor invective pen, that yields to ought,
By threat'ning terrified, by money bought,
Whose very thoughts it dare not loudly own,
For fear some wrangler force it to atone
An uttered sentence, which, though truth is there,

Must give to menaces, as smoke to air,
Can never check the follies of an age,
Nor bid the weak be strong, the fool be sage.
I only war for right against the wrong,
Nor critic stand, though critique is my song.

Then I—v—g first, the greatest of the day,
Before whose genius babblers fade away ;

E'en though his wit and talents some dispute
(What lion ever pleased a lesser brute?)
In vain against him critics storm and rave,
His path of glory lies beyond the grave.
But still 'tis said that in his earlier days,
He built Astoria for an Ast-r's praise,
Or Ast-r's gold, which dazzled Irv-ng's eye,
And called his spirit from its realm on high.
Yet we may boast him at our proudest
 shrine,
And there the foremost place to him assign.
A household word his name will be, and
 must,
When all the scribblers crumble into dust ;
When it shall be forgot they did exist,
Will Scott and Irv-ng head a noble list.

And next behold ! that meets our searching
 eye,
The learned author of the pedlar "Spy,"
Whom all that read, perusing, well may see
His high bred thoughts of aristocracy,

For which, well praised and flattered as he
goes

Among such fish as bite the bait he throws,
Although'tis meant for golden scales divine,
Hooks but some poor ones of the "codfish
line,"

Takes novel subjects both from sea and
shore,

Inflicts the public with them twice a score.
"Bravos," and "Deerslayers," and all such
tribe

Fill up the brain of this prolific scribe,
While pressing thickly on bring up the rear,
"Borderers," and "Rovers," and a "Pio-
neer."

Then "Last of the Mohicans," may it be
The last of such a tribe we e'er shall see.
O C—p—r! C—p—r! is it not a shame
To write so many as to lose thy fame?
Or had'st thou but contented been with few,
I well had sung thy praise, nor spoken thus
of you.

And thou, our greatest poet! who shall
write?
When thou hast hushed thy "Voices of the
Night;"
Thy mind seeks heaven, its hidden things to
know,
Thou'rt blessed, indeed, our noble Longfellow,
And, reading thee, it sickens me to see
Such simple stuff now known as poesy,
Not by our standard bards, but only those
Who publish silly rhyme and mangled prose,
Who much the Muses' holy hill disgrace,
Make fools of poets and poetic race;
But thine we hear, and hearing, love it
well,
Like the sweet music of a silver bell.
Thy "Psalm of Life," so truthful, long will be
A psalm of life for those that follow thee;
While all that seek to find fame's golden
gate,
May "learn to labor" and "may learn to
wait."

Shall "Thanatopsis" go unnoticed here,
Who for a fame bids the bright "Past"
 appear,
With buds of glory crowned: but ah! be-
 neath,
Dire abolition stains his shining wreath.
Poems and politics can ne'er be joined,
For one drives out the other from the mind;
Nor can you mix truth with disunion well,
One comes from heaven, the other smacks
 of hell.
And sure the poet strikes the strings in vain
If stern veracity fills not his strain.
Thus Bry-nt's rhymes must be all he can
 boast,
While his black flag is flying from his "Post."
Mend thy ways, Bry-nt; leave thy colored
 friends,
Nor always think "means justify the ends,"
Should to free slaves from cruel fate adverse,
And let them loose to be our plague and curse,
Within thy heart a solemn duty feel,

Mind the commandment, friend, "Thou shalt not steal."

Then Morris next, the Moore of our day,
More sweet, and far more moral in his lay :
Immortal may his verse through ages be,
And critic, "Woodmen, ever spare that
tree."

I love him for his generous, open heart,
More than his rivals in the rhyming art ;
His tender sympathies to all to give,
That while he lives still let another live.
Revered by one at least his name shall be,
"For I'll protect him now, in youth he shel-
tered me."

And W-ll-s comes ; while satire's self must
yield
When friendship kindly offered takes the
field ;
How many pronder, with devotion's sway
O'er the bright warblings of thy sacred lay ;

I care not how the world may speak of thee ;
If thou hast faults what mortal e'er was free
From all the failings of humanity ;
To sometimes err belongs to mortal race
Nor are they clear that hold poetic place,
Then let man know, it is not only vain,
But shows a screw loose always to complain.
There is a lesson taught by one of old
And yet though human kept his pen unsold,
A man who valued truth more than his ease,
" He is a fool whom nothing e'er can please."
Thou art a poet, not of the mean school
Of him who sings, yet sings to befool,
Not as a man of thee my muse must write
But as an author, for we have no right
To seek for things, that all would keep from
sight.

Now proudly floating on the "Ocean wave,"
With fame his pilot, his light bark to save
From that oblivion which will be the lot
Of half by whom mere verse has been begot ;

Whose busy brains in biggest labor bend
 With half-spun stories, couplets without end,
 Comes S-rg-nt, better than the general race,
 But yet for this, still very common-place ;
 While L-w-ll, Wh-tt-r, and H-lm-s com-
 bine

To lengthen out a fair poetic line :
 And Saxé, too, a modern junior Hood,
 As great a punster, but not half as good,
 Whose soul in air takes many a noble flight,
 A sort of intellectual paper kite.

All hail! thou great song-monger of the age!
 Brought up a printer, and by nature sage :
 All hail! we laud thy greatness to the skies,
 Successful winner of great Barnum's prize!
 Knight-errant writer, through thy roving
 brain

We look o'er Europe, mountain, hill, and
 plain ;
 See El Dorado opening to our eyes
 Her roseate gate beyond our western skies,

Look from its mountain-tops and thence
 behold

The broad Pacific lave her sands of gold.

Immortal Taylor! any dost thou please,

Delivering lectures to "Societies"

On this and that; now roaming here, now
 there,

Speaking on everything and everywhere?—

Greatly I fear we'll be compelled to own

Thou doest much, but master art of none.

And last of all, most worthily passed by,

Some modern "Dido" meets our wond'ring
 eye.

O shades of Pope and Byron, cease from wrath,

And give the pointed lash to George M-g-th,

Whose half-rhymed couplets no more hit
 the mark

Than some blind archer shooting in the
 dark.

If I were he, I would my plot reverse

And mend my heroes, too, if not my verse :

It seems he has endeavored much to show
one,

He is a hero of his own—he's "Nowun ;"
But still let "laughers" in their puddle squirm,
No one will deign to trample on a worm.

My task is o'er, my harp I now resign,
And ask no laurels of the mighty "Nine :"
With conscious truth, I seek no other crown
Than that of keeping vice and folly down,
That long the pale Pyrene may belong
To noble poets and to nobler song.

Poets that in Parnassus still may dream,
And drink the clear, pure, Heliconian stream,
And not disturbed by foolish birds that cry,
The silly jackdaw and the chattering pie,
Who stun our ears with their perpetual ring ;
You know they squeak, but they will swear
they sing.

So boyish men and oft half-witted boys
Now pass for poetry discordant noise ;
While here and there some just pinfeathered
thing

Mounts up in air and weakly tries to sing.
Farewell! and reader, if too true
I've drawn my picture of some one like you,
Reform your path, and seek a different end,
Be led by reason, though in rhyming penned;
But if some kindly friend should think with
me,
Hear what I hear, and see what faults I see,
Should fear that follies when they once begin
From step to step lead on to crime and sin,
Should wish to check them oft but never
dare,
Prevented by the daring front they wear,
Raising his voice to teach, is left forlorn
To all the darts of universal scorn.
I know 'tis fashion now to be a fool,
That all do learn it ere they come from
school,
That one has wit if wintered once in France,
Knows how to gamble, dissipate, and dance,
Yet I for one can meet the critic's wave,
And fear its harm when impotent to save.

But long as I have force the storm to stem,
I'll praise the good, the evil will condemn.
And if my muse has ta'en too stern a text,
And men do rage, and silly fools are vexed,
I cannot help it; what is said is said,
I fear no more the living than the dead.
I leave no publishers to mourn unsold
Pages of rhyme once bartered off for gold;
No weeping friends with tear-betrickled face,
If I'm unpopular shall mourn my case;
At harsh reviews I will not be undone,
Or like bay-salt but crystal in the sun;
At least to muse I always will be free,
Write what I please about society.
If sundry authors here should take offence,
Their threats are idle as their impotence,
Their rhyme is murder—like the actor's
 jest,—
But I have finished—let them do their best.

THE END.

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